



The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

~ ORANGES & MAPLEWOOD BRANCH ~

Belleville • Bloomfield • East Orange • Livingston • Maplewood
Millburn • Nutley • Orange • South Orange • Verona • West Orange

April 23, 2025

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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NAACP Oranges & Maplewood Branch celebrates its 112th Freedom Fund Gala with Keynote by CBS's Michelle Miller and Honors Local Leaders

Livingston, NJ — On Saturday, April 19, 2024, the NAACP Oranges & Maplewood Branch—New Jersey's oldest NAACP branch and the third oldest in the nation—hosted its **112th Annual Thurgood Marshall Freedom Fund Gala** at the Cedar Hill Country Club in Livingston, NJ. Themed **"ALL IN,"** the evening was a powerful reaffirmation of the organization's commitment to collective action, community engagement, and progress.

Nationally renowned journalist and CBS News correspondent **Michelle Miller** delivered a heartfelt keynote address reflecting on the power of storytelling, the evolution of journalism, and the importance of building meaningful partnerships. **"History is near and dear to my heart... We need the NAACP. We need organizations like it,"** Miller said, acknowledging the role of institutions in shaping civic life.

Reflecting on her profession, Miller added, **"I look at those journalists of that day in empowering their people through their words and through their discovery of truth to where just before I was born and during my education... gave way to the likes of Gayle King and Robin Roberts and Oprah Winfrey, busted through those glass ceilings."**

She also emphasized the importance of unity across lines of difference: **"The partners that you hold on to, no matter what they look like. No matter where they've been, no matter what nation they call home, no matter creed or religion, your partners, your allies will get you through. I belong to a profession... protected by the Constitution of the United States... both lawyers and journalists."**

The evening featured a powerful poetry performance by award-winning journalist and author of *American Negra*, **Natasha S. Alford**, whose original work honored the strength and spirit of Black America.

This year's Gala honored a distinguished group of change makers whose contributions span civic leadership, corporate advocacy, labor, public health, youth empowerment, and faith-based service. The 2025 Freedom Fund Honorees included:

- **The Honorable Donald Payne, Jr.** (*Posthumous*)
- **Marc H. Morial**, President of the National Urban League (*Civic Engagement & Community Service*)
- **Sara Peña**, Public Affairs Director, PSEG (*Corporate Leadership*)

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- **Gary Mann**, President & CEO, Jasfel Analytics, Chairman of the Board of Directors, African American Chamber of Commerce of New Jersey, and Labor Advocate (*Labor & Industry*)
- **Dr. Chris Pernel, MD, MPH, FACP (The Good Doctor)**, Director of the National NAACP Center for Health Equity, Public Health Advocate, and Social Change Agent (*Legacy Award*)
- **Saint Matthew AME Church** (*Religious Affairs*)
- **Reginald Bledsoe**, Director of Essex County LGBTQ Affairs (*Millennial Freedom Award*)
- **Imani Corbett**, Founder of the NAACP Seton Hall University Chapter (*Trailblazer Freedom Award*)
- **Otis Livingston**, Emmy Award-winning Sports Anchor and Reporter, CBS 2 New York (*President's Award*)

The event was made possible by the generous support of **Visionary Sponsor PSEG**, along with the **HFCO (Health Care Foundation of the Oranges)**, **RWJBarnabas Health | Newark Beth Israel Medical Center**, **Jasfel Analytics**, and the **African American Chamber of Commerce of New Jersey**. Special thanks were given to **Cedar Hill Country Club Manager Weisser Millien**, **City of Orange Township Council President Adrienne K. Wooten**, and **Senator Britnee Timberlake**, who presented official proclamations honoring the evening's awardees.

The Branch also acknowledged messages of congratulations from **NAACP National President Derrick Johnson**, **NAACP National Chairman Leon Russell**, and the **NAACP New Jersey State Conference President Richard T. Smith**, recognizing the Branch's historical role and ongoing impact.

"As you are aware, freedom is not free," said **Branch President Danielle K.S. Thomas**. **"Our Freedom Fund Gala is not only a celebration—it is our most vital fundraising event. The proceeds support year-round programming in education, economic empowerment, housing, health, and youth development."**

"The NAACP is more relevant now than in its 116-year history, at the forefront of advocacy for Social Justice and equality for all," said **Freedom Fund Chair Robert "Bob" Simmons**.

"Now is the time for us to come together in a spirit of unity and comradeship to continue the good work we have begun. We do so, especially, to inspire and encourage our rising young leaders," said **Freedom Fund Vice-Chair Lady Trisha Scipio**

Founded on **April 18, 1913**, the branch footprint represents 11 communities in Essex County, New Jersey. Those communities include: Belleville, Bloomfield, East Orange, Livingston, Maplewood, Millburn, Nutley, Orange, South Orange, Verona, and West Orange. The NAACP Oranges & Maplewood Branch continues to serve as a cornerstone for civil rights in New Jersey, driven by a mission to ensure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights for all persons.

For media inquiries or to support the Branch's initiatives, please contact:
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